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ON THE EARLY SLAVS.

THE NARRATIVE OF IBRAHIM-IBN-YAKUB.

IN the preface to his book *Skazania Musulmanskikh Pisateley* Dr. Harkavy promised to publish another volume in which he intended to include all the remaining Arabic as well as Persian and Turkish narratives about Russia and the Slavonic nations. He declared that "the greater part of the materials" had already been collected by him. He even promised to publish a third volume, which would contain a review of the works and results of research of all his predecessors in this field of study. This promise was never fulfilled. The author of *Skazania* seems to have been too much attracted and too busy with a series of works which he published in various Russian and German scientific periodicals concerning the history of Jews who lived in ancient times in Crimea and in southern parts of the country which many centuries afterwards became a part of Imperial Russia. He died in 1919, at the age of 84, but nothing like a continuation of his excellent and important *Skazania* has appeared.

This, however, does not mean that he had altogether given up the study of Arabian Sources of Russian or Slavonic history. I have been told by a friend who looked through his manuscripts after his death, that he left an immense collection of fragmentary notes and slips on Arabian and other Oriental authors, but it would require another specialist like Harkavy himself and a man's whole lifetime to put them in order, to verify the references and to supplement them.

In any case, as far as concerns works in Arabic, another really important account of ancient Slavonic countries, if not of Russia, was brought to light about five or six years after Dr. Harkavy's book appeared in print. It is a narrative by Ibrahim-ibn-Yakub, a Spanish Jew, known generally as "Ibrahim-ibn-Yakub, the Israelite," or as the Arabs say "Israili."

Nothing is known of the author except what may be deduced from his own narrative. The Russian academician and historian A. Kunik,¹ who first received a copy of this narrative written

¹ He died in 1903, at the age of 89.

in Arabic, defined the time of Ibn-Yakub's account at about the year 965. The same year is fixed by a later investigator, Fr. Westberg, who in his very substantial commentary ¹ on the narrative of Ibrahim-ibn-Yakub came to the same result by a totally different chain of arguments, in opposition to some eminent German Slavists, like F. Wigger and Georg Jacob, who take the year of Ibn-Yakub's narrative to be 973. Twenty-four years after the appearance of Westberg's book, Dr. Georg Jacob returned again to the same question ² and continues to maintain that the narrative belongs to the year 973 and not to 965. It is also not known definitely in what capacity the Arabic Israelite composed his important memoir. Kunik, followed by Westberg, thinks he was a rich merchant, who travelled through to the Slavonic countries for purposes of trade. Others, with Baron V. Rosen, who translated the narrative into Russian at the request of Kunik, believe he was a member of an official mission sent by the Spanish Khalif Al-Hakam II to Otto I, and his report was placed in the library of Cordova, where the Spanish-Arabic scientist Abu Obaid al-Bekri used it in the year 1066 for his compilation of the *Book of Roads and Countries*. It was only through this book of Al-Bekri that the name of Ibn-Yakub became known at all to later generations. Baron Rosen in his introduction to the Russian translation, writing in 1878, said: "Of its author, Ibrahim-ibn-Yakub the Israelite, as far as we know, no information up till now has been found in Arabian literature. He is not even quoted by later compilers, except for the brief reference by Sipahyzadeh, which Charmoy uses in his *Relation de Mas'oudy*." And Kunik, in his commentaries which accompany Baron Rosen's translation, mentions the fact that Harkavy in 1868, having come across the name of Ibrahim-ibn-Yakub in Charmoy's reference, addressed himself through the *Jüdische Zeitschrift für Wissenschaft und Leben* and some other journals to all persons learned in the history of Hebrew literature with a request to communicate with him if they knew anything of that name; but no reply reached him.

But if nothing is known of the life of Ibn-Yakub, the students of his narrative acknowledge him to be a very trustworthy,

¹ *Kommentary na Zapisku Ibrahima-ibn-Yakuba o Slavyanakh*, St. Petersburg, 1903, 152 pp. Also his article in *Mémoires de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de St. Petersburg*, 1898, VIIIe série, Vol. III, No. 4.

² See *Arabische Berichte*, by Georg Jacob, in the series edited by V. v. Geromb und L. Mackensen, *Quellen zur Deutschen Volkskunde*, Berlin, 1927.

learned and observant writer, although some passages of his memoir must have been derived from other sources and not from personal observation. No wonder that so many books, articles and smaller notes about it have appeared in Polish, Bohemian, Serbian and German literature. Besides the Russian translation, there is also a German translation from the original done by Dr. Georg Jacob and a Dutch translation by de Goeje, with notes by Kunik. However, both these latter translations are of a rather free character, especially the Dutch one, and not almost strictly verbal like Baron Rosen's. Here, in this English version, I follow the Russian translation of Rosen, at the same time using the notes and commentaries, as far as is necessary, of Kunik, Jacob, Westberg and others. The insertions in brackets generally belong to Baron Rosen's translation, but concerning proper names, geographical and personal, I had to make my own choice among the translators.

These geographical names, as well as names of persons, have been transcribed by the learned translators from the Arabic into their respective languages and then interpreted in long commentaries and footnotes. For the proper English transcription I have had to look up the Arabic original and then, in cases where all the three learned translators agree in their commentaries on the interpretation of a name, I have used this name or put it in brackets after the transcribed Arabian name ; but when the interpretations do not agree, I have chosen one of them and comment on it in a footnote.

To these preliminary and, so to speak, technical remarks I think it also useful to add a brief synopsis of the narrative, and thus prepare the reader for what he may expect to find in it. It may be divided into three parts : the introduction, the principal part, and the conclusion. The brief introduction ends by enumerating four Slavonic kingdoms. Then follows the principal part, in which a description is given of each kingdom separately. These descriptions of separate kingdoms are interspersed with various information on distances, neighbouring countries and places. And in conclusion is given a general survey of the customs, climatic conditions, etc., of the Slavs and their countries. The reader who has had occasion to be acquainted also with the contents of my previous article on "Mahomedan writers,"¹ will find in the following text some repetitions taken from Mas'ūdī and Ibn-Dustah, also some information about Italy and Constantinople which does not concern Slavonic countries. But as

¹ See pp. 80-98, *Slavonic Review*, No. 22, June, 1929.

these passages on the whole do not occupy too much space, I have thought it wise to follow Baron Rosen, who gave a translation of the entire narrative without any omissions. The reader will also notice that some passages, like one at the beginning, belong not to Ibn-Yakub, but to Al-Bekri, who however is very precise and makes it quite clear every time whether he is using Ibn-Yakub's narrative, or making his own observations. Here follows the translation.

SEMEN RAPOPORT.

On the Slavs. The Slavs are descendants of Mazan ¹ the son of Japhet, and their dwellings (extend) from the North till they reach the West. Says Ibrahim-ibn-Yakub the Israelite: the countries of the Slavs extend from the Syrian Sea (Mediterranean) to the surrounding sea (*i.e.*, the ocean) to the North. And the northern tribes seized some of them and up till now lived among them (among the Slavs). They (consist of) numerous, various tribes. And in times of yore a king, whose title was Maha ² gathered them, and he belonged to one of their tribes called Vlinbaba, and this tribe was respected by them. Afterwards their language became separated and their order (of the state) discontinued and their tribes became (separate) groups (of state) and in each tribe of theirs a king established himself. There are now four kings of them: The king of Bolgars and Buislav (Boleslav I.), the King of Praga and Bohemia and Cracow, and Meshek, the king of the North, and Nakun ³ on the extreme west. Adjoining Nakun on the west is Saxony, and a part of Marman.⁴

¹ Evidently the Madai of the Bible (Gen. x. 1), which is explained by the close identity of the letter *d* and *z* in arabic.

I may add that a very good explanation of the itinerary which Ibn-Yakub followed is given in the above-mentioned works of Westberg with relation to the map of Europe in the 10th century.

² The Orientalists are not certain about the real name. Charm who met the name in Mas'ūdi's "Fields of Gold," saw in the name of Maha that of the Polish King Meshke, and held it to be the tribe of Polyane. Westberg reads it Madjek, the same as Charmoy. There is the same uncertainty about the next name *Vlinbaba* which G. Jacob holds to be Volhynians (the Arabic *B* can easily be taken to be *N*). Westberg agrees, but says this cannot mean the inhabitants of the present Volhynia. I do not give all the arguments on account of space.

³ The Arabic text speaks always of *Nakur*, instead of Nakun, who is the Nakon of the Obotrity.

⁴ Westberg with the Czech Jireček who gave from the Dutch a translation in the *Casopis Musea*, 1880, pp. 293-300, takes it to mean the land of Normans, the Danes. G. Jacob in his German translation prints in brackets: "Normannen = Dänen."

And his (Nakun's) country is a country with low prices for bread, rich in horses, which are exported thence also to other countries. They (the inhabitants) have a complete armament of cuirasses, helmets and swords.

From Marsbeg ¹ to Maili ² 10 miles. (From there) to the bridge 50 miles. The bridge is of wood, a mile long. From the bridge to the fortress of Nakun about 40 miles. It is also known as Grad, which means a strong fortress. And opposite Grad there is the fortress which is built on a freshwater lake. It is in such a way that the Slavs build the greatest number of their fortresses. They go to meadows which abound in water and reeds ³ and designate a round or quadrangular place in accordance with the form they want to give the fortress and with its size. Round the place they dig a ditch and of the dug out earth is made a rampart which is strengthened with boards and piles like beaten earth till the wall reaches the desired height. A gate is then measured on any side they like, and one approaches it through a wooden bridge. From the fortress Grad to the surrounding sea is 11 miles. And armies enter the land of Nakun only with great difficulty because his whole country is meadows, reeds ⁴ and bogs.

Concerning the land of Buislav, its length from the town Praga to the town Cracow is three days' ⁵ travel. On its length it is adjacent to the countries of the Turks.

The town of Praga is built of stone and lime and is the richest of towns in trade. There come to it Russians and Slavs from Cracow with merchandise and from the lands of the Turks come Mohammedans, Jews and Turks, also with merchandise and with Byzantine money, ⁶ and they export thence flour, tin and various furs. Their country is the best of the northern countries and the richest in food provision.

They sell for a kushar ⁷ so much of wheat that it suffices a man for a month, and barley is sold for a kushar enough to feed

¹ The Arabic would read like *Yzai* which is incomprehensible. De Goeje reads it *Merseburg*, Georg Jacob reads it *Burg*, the same as *Westberg*.

² Baron Rosen translates it as a name of a place, but *Westberg* and *Jacob* translate it in the original meaning of "what is adjacent."

³ *Westberg* translates it "jungle."

⁴ *Jacob* translates here *thickets*.

⁵ *Jacob* translates "three weeks." The Arabic word in the original "jumat" certainly means *weeks*. In the original Arabic there is certainly a misprint and instead of an *m* is printed the letter *ai*.

⁶ In Byzantine coin "mitkal." *Westberg* thinks the word *Byzantine* is not what it means in the original. The word reads like *markatiia*.

⁷ *Georg Jacob* makes it equal to the German *Pfennig*.

a horse forty days, and ten fowls are sold for one kushar. And in the town of Praga they make saddles and bridles and shields which are applied and used in their countries. And they make in the lands of Bohemia light handkerchiefs of a very thin texture like a net which is of no use. Their price is always one kushar for ten handkerchiefs. They trade *with*¹ them and reckon in them. They have (whole) vessels of them and they reckon them to be wealth and most precious things. Wheat and flour, horses, gold, silver and all things are bought with them.

It is remarkable that the inhabitants of Bohemia are dark and have black hair, but (those) of reddish hair are rare amongst them.

The road from Marzbrg (Magdeburg according to Jacob) to the countries of Buislav.²

From there to the fortress of Kalbe is 10 miles. From there to Nienburg 2 miles. This fortress is built of stone and mortar and lies on the river Slava. And in it (into the Slava) the river Bode falls. From the fortress Nienburg to the salt mine of the Jews which is also on the river Slava, there are 30 miles. From there to the fortress of Wurzen, which is on the river Mulde . . . and from there to the end of the forest is 25 miles. And from the beginning to the end there is 40 miles through mountains and impassable places. And from it (the forest) to the wooden bridge across the bog there is about 2 miles. From the end of the forest (and through this place) one comes to the town of Praga.

Concerning the country of Meshek, it is the greatest of their (of the Slavs) countries. It is rich in bread and meat and honey and fish. The taxes which are collected by him (by Meshek) are paid in Byzantine money.³ They also (form) the salary of his men. Every month each of them receives a fixed number of mitkals. And he has 3,000 men in armour, and these are warriors of whom a hundred is equal to ten hundred of others. And he gives to these men dress, horses, armament and everything they need. And when a child is born to one of them he (Meshek) orders at once after the birth of the child to appoint

¹ I am not sure whether it means that they trade *by the help* of these handkerchiefs as a medium of exchange or that they trade in them as wares for use. In the first sense they would fulfil the function of money, and this would explain the words below. "Most precious things" so bewildered Baron Rosen that in a footnote to his translation he observes: "Somehow this does not agree with the foregoing," that is to say, when they say "it is of no use."

² I use here and in the following lines up to the word Praga the names as interpreted by G. Jacob.

³ In the original: in *mitkals*.

him a salary, whether it is male or female. And when the child reaches full age he makes him take a wife, if it is a man, and pays for him to the father of the girl the marriage present, and if it is a female he makes her take a husband and pays to her father the marriage present. The marriage present among the Slavs is a very considerable one and their custom about it is like the customs of the Berbers. And when one has born to him two or three daughters they become the cause of his growing rich, but when two sons are born they are the cause of his becoming poor.

To the east of Meshek the Russ are bordering and on the north the Brus (Prussians). The dwelling-place of the Brus is near the surrounding sea (generally the Arabs under "surrounding sea" meant the ocean or sometimes a gulf of the ocean). And they have a separate language, they do not know the language of the neighbouring peoples. They are celebrated for their bravery: when an (enemy) army arrives no one of them waits till his comrade will join him, but comes out not caring for anybody and strikes with his sword till he falls dead. The Russ invade them on ships from the west.

On the west of the Russ there is the town of women. They possess lands and slaves. And they become pregnant from their slaves, and when one of them delivers a son they kill him. They ride horses, take the field in war in person and possess courage and bravery. Says Ibrahim-ibn-Yakub the Israelite: "The information about this town is true. I was told of it by Huta (Otto), the king of the Romans."

To the west of this town there is the tribe of Slavs which is called the community of Arbaba.¹ It lives in a marshy country of the land of Meshek to the north-west. They have a big town on the surrounding sea, which has twelve gates and a harbour, and they have there very good rules for the port.² And they are at war with Meshek and their power is great. They have no king and are not ruled by one person, but their rulers are their elders.

Concerning the king of the Bulgars says Ibrahim-ibn-Yakub: I have not entered into his country, but I have seen his ambassadors in the town Marzbrg when they came to the king Huta (Otto). They wore narrow clothes and girded themselves with long girdles on which were fastened buttons of gold and silver. Their king is of high rank. He puts a crown on his head, has

¹ One may read the Arabic also as *Ubaba*, and instead of "community" one may translate "people."

² G. Jacob, adopting a different reading of the Arabic original translates: "and they use for it (for the harbour) lines of logwoods."

secretaries, managers and officials, he issues orders and prohibitions according to (the established) rules and ceremonies as it is customary with kings and magnates. And they understand various languages and translate the gospel into Slavonic language. They are Christians.

Says Ibrahim-ibn-Yakub: "And the king of the Bulgars adopted Christianity when he took the field against the Rums (Romans) and besieged Constantinople until its king was able to conciliate him and presented him with rich presents. And to that with which he tried to conciliate, belonged also this that he gave him in marriage his daughter. And she afterwards caused (her husband) to adopt Christianity." The author (Al-Bekri) says: "Ibrahim's words show that the adoption of Christianity by the king happened after the 300th year ¹ of the Hejira, and others say that those who adopted Christianity did so in the times of King Basilios and they then remained Christians up till now."

Says Ibrahim: Constantinople is to the south of the Bulgars, and on the east and north of the latter are adjacent also the Pecheniogs.² To the west of it (of Constantinople) is the lake of Benadjia (Venetian Gulf). This is a gulf which runs out from the Syrian Sea (Mediterranean Sea) between the "great land" ³ and Constantinople, and it surrounds the great land (*i.e.*) the coasts of Rum (Rome) and Lombardy, and ends at Aquileia. Thus all these places form one (pen-)insula which on the south is surrounded by the Syrian Sea, on the East and North by the gulf of Venice, and on the West of it (this peninsula) there remains the way out. And Slavs inhabit the coasts of this gulf from its very outlet on the West ⁴ in the Syrian Sea. On the east of them are the Bulgars, and on the West other Slavs. Those who live to the west of it (of the gulf) are the most brave, and the inhabitants of that country ask of them protection and are afraid of their power. Their countries are high mountains with roads difficult to pass. In general the Slavs are brave and aggressive men, and if not for their disunion on account of their splitting

¹ Kunik points out that Al-Bekri is here somewhat confusing the chronology.

² In the Arabic text the word after some correction reads *al-Badjanakia*, which in Jacob's translation is rendered as *Petschenegen*.

³ By the "Great Land" the Arabians usually meant the European continent from Spain to Greece. Evidently Ibrahim meant chiefly Italy, which he represented as one stretch of land up to Spain, and on the other hand the "Venetian Gulf" he believed to extend very far to the West.

⁴ Baron Rosen suggests there may be a mistake in the Arabic text: instead of *West* it ought to be *East*.

into numerous branches and tribal dispersion, no nation in the world could equal them in power. They inhabit countries very rich in dwellings¹ and in provisions. They are diligent in agriculture and in other industries and in this they surpass all nations of the North. Their wares by land and sea reach the Russ and Constantinople. And the principal of the northern tribes speak Slavonic because they mixed themselves with them, as for instance the tribes al-Trshkin (Tedeschi, Germans), Ankli (Hungarians), Badjanakia (Pechenegs), Russ and Khazars. And in all the countries of the North famine happens not on account of absence of rain and persistent drought, but on account of abundance of rain and persistent dampness. Drought is not counted by them ruinous, because he who suffers from it is not afraid of it, on account of the moisture of their soil and its great coldness. They sow in two seasons, in summer and in spring, and gather two crops. The greater part of their sowing consists of millet. The cold is healthy to them, even if it is very great, but heat is injurious to them. And they are unable to travel in the countries of Lombardy on account of the heat, because the heat in Lombardy is very great and in consequence they (the Slavs) perish. Health is possible for them only at such (a temperature) at which the elements² are in solidified state. But when they melt and boil, the body dries up and death follows in consequence. And two diseases are common to them all: there is hardly to be found one of them that is free of them. These are two kinds of swellings: erysipelas and hemorrhoids. They abstain from eating chicken, because as they assert, it aggravates among them erysipelas, but they eat the meat of cows and geese and this suits their requirements. They dress in broad garments, and only the lower part of their sleeves is narrow. Their kings keep their wives locked up and are very jealous. And it happens one man has twenty wives and more. The greater part of the trees in their country are apple, pear and peach trees. And there is in their countries a remarkable bird which on the upper part is dark green. It imitates all sounds of men and animals which it hears. Sometimes they succeed in catching it; they hunt it, and its name in Slavonic is *sba*.³ Then there is a wild

¹ Instead of richest in *dwellings* from the Arabic in the original which may be transcribed as *raba*, de Goeje and Jacob read *rai* and therefore translate fertile, or rich in *fertility*.

² That is the four elements which govern the life of a human body.

³ De Goeje, Kunik, and Westberg all interpret *Sba* as the bird *starling*, but they differ in the translation of the text describing the bird. The text is no doubt somewhat confused.

fowl which is called in Slavonic *ttra* (wood-cock). Its flesh is tasty and its cries one hears from the tops of trees at a distance of one farsang (about 6 or 7 km.) and more. There are two kinds of it : black and motley, which are more beautiful than peacocks.

They have various wind and stringed instruments ; they have a wind instrument of a length more than two ells, and a stringed one which has eight strings. Its inner side is flat and not convex.

Their drinks and liquors are prepared from honey.

Mas'ūdī says : The Slavs are separated into many tribes. To their tribes belong Sbrala (Sorbs) and Dulaba (Dulebs) and Namdjin (Germans ? Niemtsy ?). This tribe is the most brave of them and the most warlike. And (to their tribes belongs) the tribe called Srnin (Serbian) and of which they are afraid, and another tribe called Mizaza (Moravians) and (the tribes) Khairavas (Croats) and Sasin and Hshabin (Kashubians). Some of these tribes follow the Christian teaching, namely that of the Jacobite sect, others have no book of revelation, do not follow any religious command and are pagans. The tribe of the king belongs to the latter.

The tribe of which we said that it is called Srnin burns itself in fire when the head of the tribe dies. They also burn their horses. And their customs are like those of the Indians. They are adjacent with the East and far from the West.¹ They rejoice and feast at the burning of the dead and say that their rejoicing and gladness (arises) because his (the dead man's) Lord had pity on him. The wives of the dead cut their arms and faces with knives. And when one has declared that she loved him she (after his death) fastens a rope, rises to it on a chair, tightly puts it round her neck, then the chair is taken away from under her and she remains dangling till she dies. Then she is burned and thus becomes united with the husband.

Their (the Slavs') women when married do not commit adultery. But when a girl falls in love with someone she goes to him and satisfies her passion with him. And when a man marries and finds his wife to be a virgin he says to her : " If there was any good in you, men would love you and you would choose one who would possess you," and drives her away and renounces her.

The countries of the Slavs are very cold, and the cold there is greatest when the nights are moonlit and the days clear.

¹ Jacob very reasonably translates it : " although these (*i.e.*, the Indians) belong to the east and are far from the west."

Then the cold increases and the frost gets stronger. The soil becomes then like stone and all the liquids become frozen, and the well and the canal ¹ become covered as if with plaster so that they become like stone. And when people let water through their nose ² their beards become covered with a layer of ice as if with glass, so that one has to break them till one gets warm or enters the room. And when the nights are dark and the days foggy then the frost decreases and the cold weakens and at that time ships are broken and they who are on them perish, because out of the ice of the rivers in these countries get loose on them (on the ships) blocks like hard mountains. Sometimes a youth or a strong man is able to cling to such a block and to escape on it.

They have no bath houses, but they build a house of wood and caulk its chinks with some material which is obtained from their trees and is like a green marsh moss which they call *mokh*. Instead of tar they use it for their boats. Then they erect a stove of stones in one of the corners (of this house) and at the very top opposite the stove they open a window to let out the smoke. When the stove becomes red-hot they shut this window and close the doors, and in this house are kept basins with water which they pour over the red-hot stove, and then the steam rises. Each one holds in his arm a bundle of dried branches by which they move the air, attracting it to themselves. Then the pores of their body become opened and out of their body comes what is superfluous and rivers run out of them. And no traces of a rash or abscess are left on any of them. And they call this house *al-atbba*.

Their kings drive on big, high cars running on four wheels ³ and legs. At their corners are four strong props and the frame of the car is hung on them by strong chains, which are wrapped with silk. Therefore there is not so much shaking for the man inside as in an ordinary car. They make such ones also for the sick and wounded.

The Slavs carry on wars with the Rums, Franks, Longobards, and other nations, and fight with changeable luck.

¹ Jacob translates : " Sprudel "—springs.

² The Mahomedans during their ablutions imbibe water through their nose and then spurt it out.

³ Baron Rosen is not sure about his translation of the passage concerning the construction of the cars, although all the other translators have followed him. Georg Jacob, with Goejc, together omit the words "and legs," although they are in the original Arabic, and thus evade the difficulty.